

STALIN AND STALINISM

Second Edition

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SEMINAR STUDIES

IN HISTORY



PART TWO: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

2 THE THIRTIES

POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

After the war scare of 1927 [5] came the fear of foreign economic intervention. Wrecking was taking place in several industries and crises had occurred in others – or so Stalin claimed in April 1928. The following month he put the nation's youth on the alert: 'Comrades, our class enemies do exist. They not only exist but are growing and trying to act against Soviet power.' Then it was announced that a large-scale conspiracy involving engineers in the Shakhty areas of the Donbass had been uncovered. Stalin skilfully used the perceived threats to Soviet power to create an atmosphere of tension and apprehension. The coiled-up energy of the population could thereby be released and directed towards the achievement of specific targets. The first Five-Year Plan (FYP)* set these goals. In December 1929 it was decided that the plan could be achieved in four years and in the end it ran from 1 October 1928 to 31 December 1932. Plan goals were continually increased irrespective of economic rationality, as human will overruled mathematical calculations. As one planner stated: 'There are no fortresses which we Bolsheviks cannot storm'. The Great Depression, which began in 1929 in the advanced industrial states, added fuel to the conviction that the Bolsheviks were on the highway to success.

The Soviet leadership appears to have been surprised how easy it was to speed up collectivisation. Party officials in several selected areas competed with one another and when they proved successful Stalin and the key officials concerned with collectivisation, Molotov and Kaganovich, knew that they could outstrip the modest aim of collectivising 20 per cent of the sown area laid down for 1932 [69].

The number of peasants in collective farms of all types doubled between June and October 1929, and Stalin declared on 7 November 1929 that the great movement towards collectivisation was under way [8]. The Politburo stated on 5 January 1930 that large-scale *kulak* production was to be replaced by large-scale

kolkhoz production. Ominously, for the better-off farmers it also proclaimed the 'liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class'.

It was hoped that the collectivisation of the key grain-growing areas, the North Caucasus and the Volga region, would be completed by the spring of 1931 at the latest and the other grain-growing areas by the spring of 1932. A vital role in rapid collectivisation was played by the 25,000 workers who descended on the countryside to aid the 'voluntary' process. The 'twenty-five thousanders', as they were called, brooked no opposition. They were all vying with one another for the approbation of the party. Officially, force was only permissible against *kulaks*, but the middle and poor peasants were soon sucked into the maelstrom of violence. *Kulaks* were expelled from their holdings and their stock and implements handed over to the *kolkhoz*. What was to become of them? Stalin was brutally frank: 'It is ridiculous and foolish to talk at length about dekulakisation. ... When the head is off, one does not grieve for the hair. There is another question no less ridiculous: whether *kulaks* should be allowed to join the collective farms? Of course not, for they are the sworn enemies of the collective farm movement.' *Kulaks* were divided into three classes. The first consisted of about 63,000 'counter-revolutionary' families who were to be executed or exiled and have their property confiscated. Group two was made up of 150,000 households labelled 'exploiters' or 'active opponents' of collectivisation. These were to be deported to the remote regions of the east and north, but permitted to retain some possessions. Another group was composed of between 396,000 and 852,000 households who were to be allowed to remain in their home region but on land outside the collectives. (This meant, in fact, on land which was at that time not arable.) If one assumes a modest five members per household, the first two groups amounted to over one million persons. No one in the Politburo cared whether they survived or not. Others abandoned their home villages and made for the towns, desperately trying to beg enough for survival. *Kulak* children were sometimes left to die, since their deported fathers belonged to the 'wrong class'.

Sufficient sporadic peasant violence met the 'twenty-five thousanders' and their cohorts to make the leadership nervous. Thereupon Stalin changed course and launched an attack on all those officials who had herded peasants into collectives against their will. His article in *Pravda* on 2 March 1930 was entitled 'Dizzy with Success' [Doc. 3]. In it he pilloried the wayward officials, but this was mere double-talk. It was he, in fact, who had driven them

on! *Pravda* became a best-seller in the countryside as desperate officials attempted to restrict circulation. There was a stampede to leave the *kolkhozes*, and only 23 per cent of the peasants were left in collective farms by 1 June 1930. Stalin had not lost his nerve; he merely wished to ensure that the spring sowing was completed. Afterwards the collectivisation offensive was resumed, and the beaten peasants took to slaughtering their livestock and breaking their implements rather than see them collectivised. Mikhail Sholokhov, the Nobel Prize-winning Soviet novelist, catches the atmosphere in *Virgin Soil Upturned*. "Slaughter! You won't get meat in the *kolkhoz*", crept the insidious rumours. And they slaughtered. They ate until they could eat no more. Young and old suffered from indigestion. At dinner time tables groaned under boiled or roast meat. Everyone had a greasy mouth, everyone hiccupped as if at a wake. Everyone blinked like an owl, as if inebriated from eating' [5 p. 162].

Livestock numbers in 1932 were less than half those of 1928. To the government the tractor was the symbol of the mechanisation and modernisation of agriculture and the trump card of the new *kolkhozes* and state farms, *soukhozes* [8]. It penetrated the countryside more rapidly than expected. Since so many draught animals had been slaughtered, scarce resources had to be diverted to the production of even more tractors. The shortage of cattle and sheep meant less leather and wool for consumer goods.

Timid voices were raised about the breakneck speed of industrialisation. Could the pace not be slowed down a little? Stalin firmly rejected such thinking [Doc. 4]. He even wanted the economy to expand more rapidly, on the grounds that with imperialist vultures circling overhead the Soviet Union had to become strong enough to keep them at bay. 'Specialist baiting' was a popular sport during the early years of the first FYP [8]. After the Shakhty trial in 1928 came the 'industrial party' trial in November–December 1930, when industrial experts confessed to wrecking and other heinous crimes. The Shakhty trial was followed by the arrest of thousands of 'bourgeois' or non-party engineers. By 1931 half of the engineers and technical workers in the Donbass, a key industrial region, had been arrested [108]. What did the charge of wrecking amount to? If a machine broke down – as happened quite often, due to the fact that the peasant turned worker had to learn on the job – someone higher up was to blame. If imported machinery [5] was not adequately used it could be construed as wrecking. It may seem paradoxical that at a time when their skills were desperately needed,

'bourgeois' and foreign engineers were being held behind bars. However, there was a rationale behind the arrests: the leadership was desperately anxious to break down all resistance to central directives. The 'bourgeois' engineer could see the the orders were not feasible and said so. Moscow wanted engineers who would attempt to do the impossible.

A declared opponent of the campaign against 'bourgeois' engineers was Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who became head of the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh) at the end of 1930 and thereby the *de facto* leader of the drive for industrialisation. He appears to have influenced Stalin's decision to call a halt to the campaign. On 23 June 1931 the Secretary-General declared that the policy of considering every specialist an 'undetected criminal and wrecker' should be dropped [Doc. 5]. Show trials of engineers did not completely cease, however, as the case against the Metro-Vickers engineers in 1933 demonstrated.

The change of heart towards the experts was accompanied by a dramatic change in the fortunes of labour. The years 1928–31 saw workers exercise an influence over production never again to be equalled. Shock workers and shock brigades showed the workers the way, and there was a great deal of worker initiative as hierarchy was played down. This happened at a time when the planners could not accurately plot the way ahead. Some members of the leadership, working on the assumption that socialism meant a moneyless economy, believed that the exchange of products would replace money as NEP was phased out. Indeed, many of them in 1930 thought that this stage was fast approaching. It was also widely assumed that society could be transformed very rapidly and that workers would be motivated by enthusiasm, so that an end could be made to payment by result. In July 1931, however, Stalin changed his approach. He attacked the prevalent egalitarianism and proposed wage differentials which reflected skill and responsibility [Doc. 6]. The ideas of the American time and motion expert, F.W. Taylor, found favour, and engineers were given the task of setting scientifically based norms. Authority was reinvested in specialists and engineers.

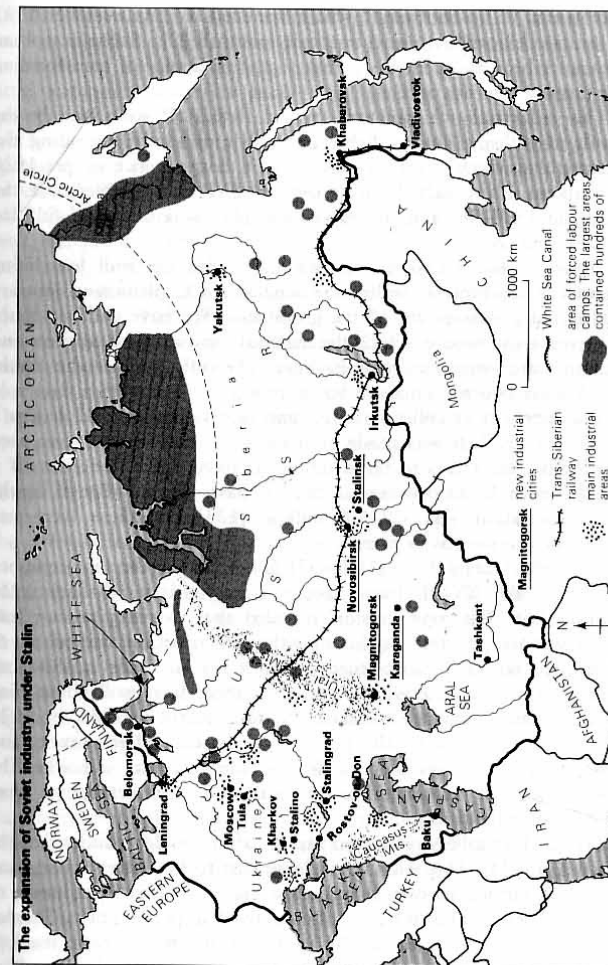
The first FYP was a period of genuine enthusiasm, and prodigious achievements were recorded in production. The 'impossible' targets galvanised people into action, and more was achieved than would have been the case had orthodox advice been followed. New cities, such as Magnitogorsk in the Urals, rose from the ground. According to official statistics the first FYP in industry was fulfilled [Doc. 7,

no. 5] with the plan for producers' goods – the production of the means of production (heavy industry) – being over-fulfilled [no. 9]. Consumption goods (light industry), on the other hand, fell short of the target [no. 10]. These figures are open to criticism, however. They are expressed in 1926–27 prices, but many of the goods produced during the plan were not made in 1926–27. Money values in roubles were used instead, and these certainly erred on the high side. Various western economists have recomputed the results and their estimates range from 59.7 to 69.9 per cent fulfilment [nos. 6–8].

Whatever the figures, a great engineering industry was in the making and the rise in the output of machinery, machine tools, turbines and tractors was very impressive. Ukraine, the Volga, the Urals and the Kuzbass (south-west Siberia) saw most expansion. Engineering enterprises in the Leningrad and Moscow regions were modernised and expanded. Industry also penetrated the less well developed republics, especially Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Power for expanding Ukrainian industry flowed from the huge Dnieper dam which was completed during these years. The plan for railway expansion was less than half achieved but canals increased rapidly, often using forced labour, as in the case of the Volga–White Sea canal [8].

Not surprisingly, the agricultural performance was abysmal [Doc. 7, no. 11]. The rush out of the countryside led to the over-fulfilment of the labour plan [no. 16] and unemployment in the cities had disappeared by 1932. Industry took on many more workers than planned [no. 17]. All this meant that money wages were far in excess of the plan [no. 18]. Thus there was even more money than expected chasing the few consumer goods on offer. Living standards were miserably low, and if they were low in the towns they were even worse in the countryside.

Despite the over-fulfilment of the labour plan, industrial production was officially only a fraction over the plan [no. 5]. This meant that labour productivity was very low, and came as a great disappointment to the planners. Determined efforts were made to increase labour discipline during the FYP. The first legislation involving prison sentences for those who violated labour discipline was passed in January 1931. Work books were introduced for all industrial and transport workers in February 1931, and the death sentence could be applied for the theft of state or collective farm property as from August 1932. Missing a day's work could mean instant dismissal after November 1932, and the internal passport



(not issued to *kolkhozniks*)* was introduced on 27 December 1932 to restrict movement and increase control [8]. Such draconian measures bear eloquent testimony to the difficulty of transforming the peasant into a worker.

The industrial achievements of the first FYP were mainly the result of utilising the available capacity more fully, including the extra plant which came on stream as a consequence of pre-1928 investment. Plant started during the first FYP was completed, in the main, in 1934–36, and the investment plan was only half fulfilled (Doc. 7, no. 26).

However, not everyone was willing to put up with low living standards indefinitely. Stalin, speaking at a CC plenum in January 1933, had a message for all the grumblers: 'We have without doubt achieved a situation in which the material conditions of workers and peasants are improving year by year. The only people who doubt this are the sworn enemies of Soviet power.'

The mayhem of collectivisation and low yields of 1932 led to a famine in 1933. It was made even worse by the need to seize seed grain from the farms to build up stocks to feed the Red Army if a conflict with Japan occurred in the Far East. The number of deaths from starvation was 7.2–8.1 million [123] but these were not mentioned in the Soviet press.

Thus the second FYP (1933–37) got off to a very inauspicious start and the XVIIth Party Congress in January–February 1934 redrafted it. The new version revealed that Soviet planning had become more realistic, for this time the targets set did not belong to cloud cuckoo land. Agriculture was in a parlous state in 1933 but improved rapidly afterwards. Although there were still about nine million peasants outside the collective farm sector in 1934, by 1937 they had practically all been collectivised. High taxes and compulsory deliveries were levied on the peasant, and when he could not meet his obligations all his goods and belongings were sold to meet the deficit.

Livestock numbers recovered rapidly after the depredations of the early 1930s [8]. This was due in large part to the state's willingness to permit farmers to own their own animals – within strict limits, of course. Each household was also allowed a private plot. Surplus produce could be sold legally in towns in the *kolkhoz* market, though only by the producers themselves. No middlemen were permitted to reappear.

A Congress was convened in 1935 to draft a model charter for the *kolkhozes*, which was to stay on the statute book until the early

1970s. The *kolkhoz* was defined as a voluntary cooperative working land provided by the state rent-free in perpetuity. The chairman was to be elected by the members, but in practice the *kolkhoz* enjoyed little autonomy since its goals were set by the party and the government. The mechanical work was done under contract by machine tractor stations [8]. Thus the available machinery was spread around as much as possible. The farms paid for such services in kind. Unlike state farms or *sovkhoses*, collective farms did not offer their members a guaranteed wage before 1966. If the farm did well, the profits were shared out at the end of the year. If results were poor, little or nothing was paid out. Hence it was possible for a *kolkhoznik* to work assiduously and to receive little or no reward for his labours. Not surprisingly he quickly came to realise that the private plot was his staff of life and that his cow was especially valuable [Doc. 26]. He therefore devoted his energies to his private plot and merely went through the motions on the collective farm. The girls often opted out of agriculture altogether by moving to the towns, and the more ambitious young men followed them.

The second FYP was over-fulfilled, in general, by 3 per cent [Doc. 7, no. 5]. The engineering industry again expanded rapidly. The output of steel almost trebled, the main reason for this being that the great plants begun during the first FYP entered production. Magnitogorsk, Kuznetsk and Zaporozhe, for example, became great industrial centres. Karaganda (Kazakhstan), the Kuzbass and the Urals saw a great expansion of coal production; the generation of electricity grew but oil output was disappointing as Baku and the Urals–Volga fields failed to cope with their technical problems. Industry was spread around the country, even to the non-Slav republics where the return on investment was lower than in 'older' industrial areas [8].

The pious hopes about according consumer goods greater emphasis bore no fruit [no. 10]. One of the reasons for this was the increasing share of industrial production being devoted to defence – officially only 3.4 per cent of total budget expenditure in 1933 but 16.5 per cent in 1937. (Real defence expenditure in 1933 appears to have been about 12 per cent.) Agriculture flopped again [no. 11]; indeed no FYP for agriculture ever achieved its targets in the Soviet Union.

The number of workers in the economy as a whole, and especially in industry, fell below the levels projected by the FYP [no. 16], but as output had exceeded the targets this meant that labour productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory

factors to this was the impact of the Stakhanovite movement, named after Aleksei Stakhanov, who on 30–31 August 1935 had shown just what *could* be done by mining 102 tonnes of coal in five hours and forty-five minutes (the equivalent of fourteen norms). Doing the work of fourteen men is an astonishing feat, but Stakhanov's achievement was also eloquent testimony to the low productivity of Soviet miners. Needless to say Stakhanov did not achieve the feat on his own: he had all the help he needed and all the machinery was in working order.

Real wages increased greatly during the second FYP but were still lower in 1937 than in 1928 and in that year were little better than in 1913. Rationing was gradually phased out in 1935, but even with a ration card (only issued to workers and employees) there was no guarantee that the desired goods would be available. Free market prices were very high, reflecting especially the shortage of bread, a staple food [8].

The third FYP (1938–41) was adopted at the XVIIIth Party Congress in 1939, but was cut short after three and a half years by the German invasion [105]. It reaffirmed the emphasis placed on heavy industry, but it also increased defence expenditure to 18 per cent of GDP in 1940. As a consequence the living standards of workers and employees stagnated and may even have fallen slightly by 1941.

Forced labour, supervised by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD),* made a significant contribution to the fulfilment of the plan. Western estimates of the number of prisoners in 1941 range from 3.5 million to 15 million. Recent Soviet research has produced a figure of 1.9 million in 1941 rising to 2.5 million in 1952 [110]. It would appear that the Soviet figures only include part of those doing compulsory labour.

Government attitudes towards the workers became noticeably harsher in 1939 and 1940. Hitherto workers had been able to choose their place of work, and this produced a high labour turnover as they sought to improve their lot. In 1940, however, the state decreed that the free labour market was to end. No worker could change his job without permission, and skilled workers and specialists could be directed anywhere. Absenteeism, which could mean being twenty minutes late for work, became a criminal offence and one woman was actually convicted of the crime while she was in a maternity ward. The legislation stayed on the statute book until 1956, and if judges were soft on offenders they were put in the dock themselves. Theft was severely dealt with. One man who worked in

a flour mill brought home a handful of grain for his hungry family, and was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Social benefits for most workers were cut and fees were introduced for students in institutions of higher learning and for senior pupils in secondary schools. The population must have been frightened.